

## Moral Libertarian Perspective: Why Identity Politics is Often Morally Questionable

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Despite its controversial reputation, identity politics appears to be increasingly influential recently. Maybe the arrival of the new wave of feminism, or perhaps the increased awareness of racial disparities in society, is causing this identity 'awakening'. While I'm personally not a supporter of the identity politics way of looking at things, even I have to agree that identity politics sometimes helps to advance the rights of minorities. However, we also cannot overlook the fact that identity politics as it currently exists is problematic. But how is it problematic? And can we save the best features of identity politics while rejecting the problematic elements?

From a moral libertarian perspective, initially there appears to be no problem with identity politics per se. If everyone had equal moral agency, surely some individuals can use their moral agency to advance the rights of the minority group they belong to? There is surely nothing wrong with this. However, things are really not that simple. Identity politics, in practice, often means seeing the world in an in-group vs out-group perspective. This perspective can lead some to only care about the rights and liberty of the in-group, and diminish the need of people outside the group for similar rights and liberty. This us-vs-them mentality doesn't sit very well with a commitment to distribute liberty and moral agency equally among every human being.

In recent years, the rise of what I would call identity socialism has made identity politics even more problematic. Identity socialism is also often called cultural Marxism, but I will avoid that term here because it also refers to a right wing anti-Semitic theory about the Frankfurt School. Besides, identity socialism is really not similar to real Marxism in substance, even though it borrows a lot of Marxist language. Basically, identity socialism borrows the concepts of class consciousness and class struggle from old-school socialism, but applies these concepts to cultural and identity groups. Thus, women can be seen as an oppressed class, and so can LGBT people or ethnic minorities, and they should 'struggle' against the privileged classes (white, male, heterosexual, and so on). Like how some old-school socialists advocated taking away the rights and liberties of the bourgeois class at least temporarily so that the working class could be liberated, many identity socialists have no problems with reverse discrimination, as it's just all part of the 'class struggle' and 'liberation'. Identity socialists also demand that good allies in the privileged classes should 'check their privilege', which often includes accepting unfair treatment without complaint. If these supposedly privileged people dare voice concerns about being treated unfairly or vote at elections in a way that they think will end the unfair treatment, they can be labelled right-wing and reactionary. In fact, what I just said could make me a counter-revolutionary enemy in the eyes of identity socialists. An us-vs-them, all out culture war thus begins. (Meanwhile, I understand that actual socialists and Marxists are also upset at this situation, because for them class solidarity is the most important thing, and the division of the working class into identity sub-groups is to be strongly discouraged.)

Anyone who is not stupid can see that there can be no compatibility between the identity socialists' version of identity politics, and the moral libertarian principle of equal moral agency. Moral libertarians believe that every individual in society should have equal moral agency (and hence liberty and political rights), regardless of their identity or cultural characteristics. A woman must not have less moral agency than a man, but then a man also must not have less moral agency than a woman. Therefore, a woman must not have less liberty or political rights than a man, but a man must also not have less liberty or political rights than a woman.

However, all this does not mean that moral libertarians cannot have some kind of politics informed by the lived experience of minorities. Unlike Marxists, who stress class solidarity above individual experience, or fascists, who stress national unity above individual experience, we liberals are individualists, i.e. we care most about the individual. Individual liberty, individual needs and individual lived experience serve as the ultimate guide for a truly liberal politics. Liberalism encourages each individual to make the most of their potential, and live their lives according to their own moral compasses. Therefore, it also encourages individuals to identify systematic barriers that prevent them from doing this. It is under the umbrella of liberalism that women, ethnic minorities and LGBT individuals first found the justification that they too deserved equal liberty and equal opportunity, and found the language to express it. While conservatives, socialists and nationalists alike dismissed their concerns as selfish demands that should give way to collectivist objectives, our liberal forerunners listened carefully and helped introduce reforms to make society more liberal for everyone. And in this best tradition, we should continue to listen to what minorities have to say. As moral libertarians, we should not rest until there is equal liberty, equal opportunity, and hence equal moral agency between every individual in society, no matter what minority characteristics they may have.

In fact, the liberal version of identity politics, which is all about letting minority voices and lived experience inform us of how to build a more liberal society for all, is much more effective in being truly inclusive than the us-vs-them, culture-as-class struggle version of identity politics. First of all, when we start to think of people collectively as groups rather than as individuals, a group dynamic builds up, where individuals in the group are expected to have primary loyalty to the group. This loyalty often effectively includes following the political agenda of the group leaders. Thus pro-life feminists often find it difficult to have a place in predominantly pro-choice feminist movements. Similarly, politically conservative or even centrist LGBT individuals often find themselves unwelcome in some activist groups led by socialist leaders. Thus such movements end up not serving all women or all LGBT people, they only serve those who politically conform to the activist establishment's wishes. First and second wave feminism often prioritized the needs and experiences of white women, and dismissed the voices of black, Latina and Asian women. Hence the introduction of intersectional feminism. But as much of feminism still has gatekeepers, the agenda of this so-called intersectional feminism is still limited by the agenda of the gatekeepers, making it effectively a Gatekeeper Limited Intersectional Feminism (GLIF). In the liberal version of identity politics, none of this would occur because everyone is welcome to add their voice to the free market of ideas; there simply is no group and therefore no leaders or gatekeepers. Secondly, group-based identity politics not only creates unequal moral agency between groups, it also creates unequal moral agency within groups. Those who do not conform to the activist establishment's agenda effectively have less moral agency, because they are often discouraged from speaking up or even semi-coerced into changing their views. Their disfavoured position within the movement also means that they may be excluded

from activities of decision making. Thus they experience injustice within the movement itself, which further compounds the injustice they receive from the wider world as a result of their female or minority status. Unlike the group-based approach to identity politics, the liberal approach stresses equal liberty and equal opportunity for each individual, thus by design it will never make people excluded in this way.